

Does Building Green = ECONOMIC RELIEF

HOW WILL THE AMERICAN RECOVERY AND REINVESTMENT ACT AFFECT JOB CREATION FOR AEC FIRMS PRACTICING SUSTAINABLE DESIGN?

On February 24th, 2009, President Obama voiced to the nation and the world the severity of the economic downturn. He managed to rally the country with an optimistic yet realistic message of hope. He pledged to save or create 3.5 million jobs with a recovery package that would put our nation back to work with “green” opportunities such as retrofitting homes and buildings. Measures like these are seen as good national security policy because the

payback on building energy efficiency reduces our dependence on foreign oil.

Much of the new administration’s platform embraces transparency. A new Web site, www.recovery.gov, was established and is dedicated to the “American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.” The site will track funds as they are distributed from the federal

government down to the state and local levels. There are graphics such as an estimated “job effect” map that show possible job numbers state by state.

There has been participation by several industry associations, including the American Institute of Architects (AIA), the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) and Architecture 2030. They have provided valuable input and put forth ideas; some even testified and presented on Capitol Hill.

Many are asking: How much of this package impacts immediate job creation? Were any of these valuable ideas and research folded into the current stimulus? If not, will they ever land a spot as a viable solution in

the face of economic recovery? How can sustainability figure into the way we run our practices and forge new opportunities? How can we balance added value with the new frugality?

Often times, it simply begins with practicing what you preach. Architect Online recently reported that the Capitol Architect has been asked by the speaker and senate majority leaders to “retrofit the Capitol power plant to burn 100 percent natural gas and not coal.” This serves as a great example of physically moving policy forward and stimulating employment—the foundation of the stimulus package.

There are parameters set up in the act that are a means to provide immediate spending on public works projects. Many of us worry that the AEC community may not benefit as much because of “shovel ready” requirements. The term shovel ready can be interpreted in different ways. For example, NPR reporter Brian Naylor spoke to federal highway administrator Jeff Paniati who stated that it means “a state that has already done the preliminary work for that project.” (Some of that could include design work completion and the team already being on a state approved vendor list.) The act defines shovel ready as a “project that must be ready to begin in 90 days.”

In sifting thru the bill, there is also a great amount of funding allocated in appropriations for construction, deferred maintenance, decommissioning, upgrade/modernization of facilities, construction, operations, and procurement. Funding is allocated for energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies. Being able to allocate dollars to much needed maintenance alone will be a smart investment in our future. The AEC community at large shares the concerns that in the current recovery package, money is not specifically allocated for school construction as originally discussed. Instead, the stimulus allows the \$35.9 billion dollars to be available for emergencies on the local level, such as staff and education budget cuts.



WHERE IS OUR MONEY GOING?

- Tax Relief – \$288 billion
- State and Local Fiscal Relief – \$144 billion
- Infrastructure and Science – \$111 billion
- Protecting the Vulnerable – \$81 billion
- Health Care – \$59 billion
- Education and Training – \$53 billion
- Energy – \$43 billion
- Other – \$8 billion

Nonprofit industry organization founders Ed Mazria and Kristina Kershner of Architecture 2030 put forth a plan for green stimulus and job creation, leveraging the private sector and incentives provided by the government. They took the view that “Although important, infrastructure and the public building sector cannot solve the U.S Economic Crisis.”

The “Two-Year, Nine Million Jobs Investment” plan expertly promotes a “housing mortgage interest rate buy-down” and a “commercial building accelerated depreciation program” for reaching energy reduction targets per the 2030 adoption challenge. Although not observed in the current recovery package, Mazria is still involved in promoting solutions. In February, he testified before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources (Bingaman Hearing Statement on Energy Efficient Buildings) and explained the plan’s benefits and metrics in connection with lowering energy consumption. The archived Webcast can be found at <http://energy.senate.gov/public>.

The USGBC has also been an active participant in supporting the new administration. As an organization that advocates for green building solutions in our schools, buildings and communities, the USGBC makes the case for viewing these opportunities as investments in our future. Recognizing the need for active support and resources, the Council set up a section on its Web site that is dedicated to recovery data and employment opportunities. Access to green jobs around the country are posted, and detailed information—such as a links to analyses of the recovery plan, highlighting key provisions and resources related to green building—is also available.

During this time of transition and recovery, the biggest challenge may be remaining positive and learning to seek new opportunities in the face of adversity. Many AEC firms are powered by the economic engine of small business and are capable of providing real solutions to the public sector and the nation’s crumbling infrastructure. We as a society should invest in keeping the doors of these offices open. An unprecedented opportunity awaits many practices to become completely sustainable and align with the demand for modernizing our country’s approach to the climate crises while rebuilding in a responsible manner. ♦

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RESOURCES

- ▶ U.S. Green Building Council – www.usgbc.org
- ▶ Architect Online: Weekly Federal Update, Ethan Butterfield
- ▶ National Public Radio: Brian Naylor: “Stimulus Bill Gives ‘Shovel-Ready’ Projects Priority”
- ▶ The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act – www.recovery.gov

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